

the **Education** of the **Modern World**

*The Shores of Wonder*

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## THE SHORES OF WONDER

*At the beginning of the 20th century, not far from Kensington Gardens in London there was a girl who, along with her brothers, would share in playful adventures in an imaginary land.*

### PART 1

While together they would share this land, individually this place held something different to each of them. To one child flamingoes might fly above lagoons, while another child might shoot the flamingoes down with a bow and arrow. One child might live in a wigwam while the other in a house of leaves. Perhaps it is a land of faeries

and gnomes. One of the children might talk with the mermaids or another crosses swords with a pirate! No matter what sort of adventure might happen or what variation on story each world might entail, every child's version of this place is influenced highly by the experiences that each day brings. And each night as they sleep, their problems and worries might mingle with their joys in this fantastical land. Eventually all matters are sorted out so that by the morning they have fresh minds for what the new day brings.

Of the attributes of a child, perhaps none is greater than the innocence of youth. The products of this innocence are discovery, curiosity, and wonder. But, as a child grows older, this innocence is left by the wayside. This vibrant and colorful and very real imaginary land slowly turns from reality to memory. In each passing day they won't see it. But over months and years a brief reflection would show that the pains of joining a world of adults weakens the spirit that keeps this world alive. A week goes by and then a month between visits. In the following months it becomes merely a memory.

And then, one day, that innocence is gone.

Some children realize this and are afraid of it. This was the case with the girl from London, Wendy, who disappeared one night with her two brothers into this land.

A boy named Peter, who was caretaker of the world's lost children, had urged them on with the promise that if they came to this land they would never have to become an adult. They could live there, permanently. They would live away from their families, and in exchange they would never need to worry about responsibilities like cleaning their room, washing up, or going to bed at a certain time. No rules. Instead, these responsibilities would be replaced with dancing and sword fighting and jungle expeditions and flying - flying like an eagle with outspread arms like wings,

falling through the rushing air, and then looking down as the clouds part and reveal the warm and goldenest bright shimmering sea. A surrender to complete freedom in a world of never ending wonder.

We know the story well of what happens to Wendy and the two brothers. Instead of adventure being all fun and games, it turns out that it is actually very serious. Though they defeat the looming figure of adulthood, they understand that they must grow up and return to their home. But they know that the spirit of Peter, the spirit of childhood, innocence and wonder is always there for them should they need it.

This same spirit lives in all children.

We too were curious in our childhood. Always seeking a new adventure in some form or another. Maybe we created our own personal Neverland: filling it with new ideas, new people, new things. Things came at us everyday that we, quite naturally, tried to reason out in our minds in the best way we knew how: creatively.

THE SURFACE OF THE  
**EARTH**  
IS THE SHORE OF THE  
**COSMIC OCEAN...**  
THE WATER SEEMS INVITING.

-CARL SAGAN



We sought discovery and wonder with our fascination of spaceships and dinosaurs, matching clothing and dressing dolls, making toys talk to each other, building pillow forts, exploring the small world of bugs, finding shapes of animals riding bicycles in the clouds, staring at the sun knowing full-well we shouldn't. The weeks watching a tomato plant grow. Seeing the moon through a telescope. The smell of a Christmas tree, the magic of its lights, the opening of presents. The excitement of seeing your best friend. The swift passing of time when you both laugh. The sadness when you see them go.

Most of these things we did more than once - likely countless times. And each time it was like new. Each time we lost ourselves in the sense of discovery and in intellectual curiosity, though we didn't know it. After all, who does these things knowing they must end without that desire for wonder - that driving curiosity of what each experience will be like?

That same wonder is always with us. J.M. Barrie wrote, "Neverland is always more or less an island... On these magic shores children at play are forever beaching their [boats]. We too have been there; we can still hear the sound of the surf, though we shall land no more."

"We can still hear the sound of the surf," he says. But we cannot return to the land of no responsibilities. We have been forced to grow up. As we had new distractions imparted to us as teens - new found hungers for love, objects, respect, breaking rules (or testing the waters, as it were) - or as we became aware of social obligations and status, a thirst for fleeting information, media, fashion... we became desensitized. We lost our innocence and with it our wholesome curiosity.

And how can we get away from it? In the media, for example, there is nothing we cannot now see. Often times what we'd rather not see is forced upon us.

Much of our world is heavily weighted by the anchor of adulthood. We work jobs we hate. We've allowed our minds to become sluggish. Our days have become monotonous and in our education we are drifting alone on a small boat. Our lifeless body is hungry and tired and dry from the sun. We yearn for that island shore with each slow bobbing of the wave.

Or maybe, instead, we have been privileged to grow up and new opportunities of intellectual curiosity and wonder await us. But what can we find wonder in?

As children, whether we were dressing our dolls or building pillow forts, we were always experimenting. We took chances hypothesizing what clothes may look like on one doll, or testing results while constructing in 3-dimensional space with couch cushions and blankets. Then we would come to a conclusion and reason out the best color skirt for the matching top, or that a large box may make better walls. And as these things came together, the world was ever expanding in front of us. We stood on the shore of a never ending ocean.

Like the ageless boy Peter Pan, wonder has not changed. We might grow old, but when we were young we were innocent and curious scientists. And in that same sense we still are.

*NEVERLAND IS ALWAYS MORE OR LESS AN ISLAND, ON THESE MAGIC SHORES CHILDREN AT PLAY ARE FOREVER BEACHING THEIR [BOATS]. WE TOO HAVE BEEN THERE; WE CAN STILL HEAR THE SOUND OF THE SURF, THOUGH WE SHALL LAND NO MORE. - J.M. BARRIE*





*The stories of magical worlds captivate us. They are filled with wondrous things. And while they may be unrealistic and fantasy, they often remind us that the true marvels of the world bring us back to a time now forgotten.*

## PART 2

We return to a childhood. A childhood not just of ourselves, but of all humankind. A romanticized version to some extent - but a time none the less when we were closer to the Earth and more mystical toward the stars. A time when what we call science was still mostly in the language of poets and in the hands of the mystics and alchemists, a sage or a priest or a shaman or perhaps a philosopher or even a mathematician. Roles which later were refined into what we know them to be. We were young then as a people. The wonder we'd known from our infancy - that unbridled curiosity and thirst for discovery - we carried with us through the "ages" of childhood. The world was an ever expanding horizon and while discoveries may have been fueled by necessity or by the will of the church or government, it was always there, in front of us - ready for us to wonder upon should the need arise.

We are young still. But now we are entering into a stage of our existence where we necessarily have to begin to be more responsible. We are entering our adulthood as a civilization. What once was discovery to us, our perception of wonder, now seems to ebb. It vanishes for a while and then like the tide occasionally returns, seemingly with longer periods of rest in between. "The surface of the Earth is the shore of the cosmic ocean." Carl

Sagan says in his opening to Cosmos, "From it we have learned most of what we know. Recently we have waded a little out to sea... the water seems inviting." Whether the shores of the Earth are literal or figurative, they relate directly to our level of maturity in the scale of the shores of wonder and the undiscovered horizon. "The ocean calls. Some part of our being knows this is from where we came... we know we are approaching the greatest of mysteries."

In order to grasp the immensity of the cosmos and all it includes, we must consider how we look at things. The world we live in and the universe we live in are two entirely different things. Our world is shaped on our ever evolving and adapting perspective of not just the enormity of what's locally around us but on our concepts of time and space and what our world is made up of. It is shaped on our sense of self and of what we understand. We entered the world knowing nothing but what our fetal perceptions collected.

By the time we became conscious of our learning, we had already formed an understanding outside of our own control. As we grew, we added to our model of what the world was. And now, it is further shaped by what we believe in about ourselves and others.

It is based off of what we know about who we are and how we are.

But our universe takes a different point of view. This view is not necessarily more complex, just different. "In a cosmic perspective, most human concerns seem insignificant, even petty," Sagan says. But understanding this point of view ultimately helps us to understand the human condition. It "reminds us that humans have evolved to wonder, that understanding is a joy, that knowledge is prerequisite to survival. Why? Because "the cosmos is also within us. We're made of star-stuff. We are a way for the cosmos to know itself."

In doing this it is required we employ the imagination. The creativity of the imagination allows us to continue to flex the elasticity of what we know or think we know. We also must constantly be skeptical. Being a skeptic keeps us from being crackpots. It allows us to take an idea, test it, and draw a conclusion based on the facts.

From a different point of view we can see that everything is interconnected through series of systems. Whether it is the system of an atom or molecule or how it relates in connection to the system of our body, the mechanics of one system effects the mechanics of systems around it or connected directly to it regardless of proportion. As Sagan said, "The cosmos is full beyond measure of elegant truths; of exquisite interrelationships; of the awesome machinery of nature." If we consider things from the systems view, we enhance our ability to see things in a variety of

scales. In these scales we can identify patterns in the interworking of systems. If we observe these relationships we can see how something acts as a whole. In turn, viewing things as a whole allows us to understand why these interrelationships exist. As a side effect of an osmosis of sorts, we gain a more empathetic view of all things.

When we perceive things in this manner, we see the world better. We can make connections and witness systems revealed in front of us constantly. We even learn faster, make more effective decisions; long lasting decisions without ego. Seeing the world around us in the cosmic view places a welcome responsibility upon us. We can take joy in a task that allows us to find appreciation in our home scale of our day to day lives, constantly finding wonder in the big and the small.

The secret to wonder is that it is already with us. We have evolved into beings that can take a complex situation made of seemingly random parts and then synthesize these into understanding as a whole. We combine existing knowledge to create an imprint of something into our memory. We

are at a point in our development, exiting our childhood, where we can do this. We have the privilege right now, at this stage of humanity, to ask deep questions, to seek solutions, to rediscover wonder in the universe under an altruistic banner - not one forced by church or state, need or greed.

We drift away from the shores of our youth, the shores of wonder. Our boat is now a ship. A ship of knowledge, of wisdom

and understanding. With that endless horizon just at the end of this boundless sea of an even greater wonder we take comfort in Sagan's words, knowing that "somewhere something incredible is waiting to be known."



*Earth.*





SOMEWHERE SOMETHING

*INCREDIBLE*

IS *WAITING* TO BE

*KNOWN...*

-CARL SAGAN

EMW.